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ABSTRACT

A study examined the perils and risks of graduate school for students. The study used information from an interview with Dr. Jean Cunningham, Chief Psychologist at Southern Illinois University, to design a questionnaire to collect self-report data regarding the stressors that influence graduate students' lives. Of 50 surveys distributed to speech communication graduate students, 24 responded (15 women and 9 men). Results indicated that graduate students risk more than academic failure when entering a graduate program--they risk their health, financial security, and personal relationships. Findings suggest that graduate students feel pressure to prioritize academic achievement over all other values--that they privilege academic assignments over personal activities, especially those related to their well being. While students must comply with institutional deadlines, much greater stress is engendered by personal expectations. Includes a sample survey. (CR)

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The Psychology of the Graduate Student: A Preliminary Study[1]

by
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Achieving the Ph.D. requires venturing through a mythic journey, a voyage perilous. To complete the quest, one has to pass by many dragons--dragons called course work, dragons named prelims, dragons called prospectus, dissertation, defense. They breathe fire, these dragons. People have died. You know their names. Their stories are part of the oral history you learn from day one. So-and-so didn't make it. They got scorched, crashed, burned. To pass by these dragons, to slip by them, to pull it off calls for sacrifice, self-sacrifice. And what are doctoral students willing to sacrifice in pursuit of their mythic grail, the Ph.D.? Well, health, for one. Physical health--eating disorders, exhaustion, migraines, ulcers. Psychological health--depression, addiction, self-destruction. We sacrifice wealth, going deeply into debt with no promise of a job on the other end. We sacrifice relationships-with spouses, friends, family. We sacrifice self-esteem--sucking up, kissing ass. All to pass by the dragons. To enter the magic kingdom. To grasp the golden

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ring. To win the Ph.D. and join the mythic circle of Those Who Know, Those With Authority, Those Ordained.

Graduate school is an environment fraught with perils that even the brightest student may not be able to overcome. It is a place of overwhelming work loads, short deadlines, pressures, and politics. There are stock characters to the myth, giants, trolls, knights, ladies, and even jesters. Students enter the graduate school culture as peasants, trying to gain citizenship and aspiring to entitlement with no resources other than their wits. Frequently, it is not intelligence as much as perseverance that predicts success; rationality without savvy proves insufficient.

Here I present preliminary findings that describe how graduate school is a risky place for any student. Specifically, I focus on those stressors that students report can impede their progress toward the degree. I conclude with a generic profile of the successful graduate student.

For my investigation of the risks implicit in a graduate school environment, I interviewed Dr. Jean Cunningham (personal communication, September 25, 1996), Chief Psychologist at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. In the interview, Dr. Cunningham outlined the stressors that place graduate students at risk of not finishing a degree. The most prevalent stressors include anxiety over finishing large projects (e.g., a thesis or dissertation), the multiple social

roles graduate students play, extra curricular responsibilities, and learning the often unspoken rules of a department's culture.

From information gathered during the interview, I designed an open-ended questionnaire to collect self-report data regarding the stressors that influence graduate students' lives as they progress toward the completion of a degree. Of 50 surveys distributed to Speech Communication graduate students, 24 people responded (15 women and 9 men). The questionnaires were completed anonymously. I have copies of the questionnaire available for anyone interested.

What I discovered from reviewing the responses is that graduate students risk more than academic failure when entering a graduate program. In fact, they report risking their health, financial security, and personal relationships; they describe feeling pressure to prioritize academic achievement over all these other values.

In response to the questionnaire, several graduate students state that they privilege academic assignments over personal activities, especially those related to their well being. As one student contends, "[My] commitments to self and health diminish as school work piles up." To keep abreast of their graduate school responsibilities, students report giving up sleep, gaining weight due to lack of exercise, and even hair loss. Another student argues that:

There is never enough time. During very busy times of the year,

> stress increases. There are a number of ramifications to this type of stress, including loss of sleep, headaches, [and being] more prone to becoming sick.

I know graduate students who have put off medical check ups, important surgeries, and chemotherapy treatments all to hit their academic deadlines.

Whereas every student must comply with institutional deadlines, the surveys reveal that much greater stress is engendered by personal expectations. Fears associated with financial insecurity pressure many students to overextend themselves. "The stress of trying to finish in three years while you have funding is very significant," comments one student. And, "[I have to] take four classes [a semester] and teach two. It is absurd!" states another.

In racing to meet their funding deadline, some students worry about the quality of education they receive. When taking twelve units a semester, a student states, "[There is] too much reading. I need to juggle time to read and comprehend with all the other things one needs to do, including sleep. [I'm] spread too thin all the time." And yet another writes, "I am always stretched for time and usually do everything I do, quickly, double-time. Sometimes I don't have the energy to do this consistently." Beyond risking health and financial security, graduate students report jeopardizing their personal lives.

Respondents state that privileging their professional development risks diminishing the importance of personal relationships. They describe losing quality time with their partners, family members, and friends. As one student remarks:

> [Trying to maintain a relationship outside of the university] is most stressful. I don't think my grades have worsened because of relationships, but graduate school does not advocate, encourage, or allow ample quality time to share with family, friends and significant others. I suppose four years (plus two from my M. A. program) of inadequate time with loved ones could affect my performance in school. I sometimes am so sad at the minimal time I have to spend with loved ones and as a result do not want to study. A consistent level of this attitude could be academically detrimental.

Balancing school and home is hard to achieve. According to the graduate students polled, there is never sufficient time to satisfy both. One person states, "Maintaining my relationship requires time that is needed to successfully complete my school work." Another remarks, "[There is] stress in having to uphold an 'expected' and 'good' relationship with a spouse and family while spending sufficient time on studies." The decision to limit time with one's partner or friends carries consequences. Some students express feelings of guilt. An individual states, "I feel bad

when I can't spend more recreational time with my partner, even though he says he understands."

While some report the added stress of maintaining a partnership outside of the university setting, others experience the loneliness of having no relationships outside of this setting. One person candidly states, "I have stress in not having a personal life!" while another contends, "[My relationships outside of the university] rarely, if at all [cause stress]. Maybe that's because graduate school effectively killed off all my outside personal relationships."

As this preliminary investigation suggests, there are other risks than academic failure when entering graduate school. Students take physical, financial and relational risks. With so much at stake, why do graduate students do it? Are there behaviors, predispositions or attitudes that can predict success?

According to Dr. Cunningham, nobody just sails through graduate school. There are stressors that all students face. It is the individual who can balance the personal and professional who survives. Dr. Cunningham contends that successful graduate students share four common traits:

1) flexibility in the face of graduate school demands;

2) an ability to cope with setbacks without losing motivation;

3) connections with some support group, whether family, peers, or professors; and

4) a vision of their future beyond attaining the degree.

The presence of these traits predicts academic success even in the face of the risks previously enumerated.

Presented here are the results from a preliminary study on the experiences of 24 graduate students at a single university. They corroborate the observations of a career psychologist specializing in treating college student stress. Perhaps if time permits, you will have questions or comments that can extend these findings into other institutional settings and personal circumstances.

Survey
Report of Graduate School Stressors

The purpose of this survey is to collect preliminary data on the types of stressors that graduate students encounter during their graduate career. Data collected from the administration of this questionnaire is to be used in a panel for SCA entitled "Effectively Navigating the Stressors and Risks of Graduate Study." All comments made on the questionnaire will be held confidential. Your participation in this survey is greatly appreciated.

Directions: Circle the answer that best describes you.

1. Your biological sex is
   male female

2. You are currently
   A 1st year student | 2nd or 3rd year student | finished with course work and preparing for prelims (waiting for prelim results) | ABD

3. I experience stress as a result of attending graduate school.
   Yes No

   *If your answer is yes, please continue answering the rest of the questions on this survey. If your answer is no, do not answer any more of the questions listed, and thank you for participating.

4. From the list presented, *check* all of the areas in your academic life that you experience stress and *describe* the circumstances surrounding each in the space provided below. If you need more room, use the back of this page. Try to be as honest as possible and please do not list any names.

   I experience levels of stress that I believe negatively affect my performance in graduate school regarding

   __a particular course or courses

__departmental relationships

__a peer or peers

__personal relationships outside of the university

__personal commitments outside of the university

__requirements of degree

__time allocation while in graduate program

__completion of degree

__obtaining a position/job after graduation

5. In the space below, please list or offer comment regarding any type of stress you experience in graduate school that has not been mentioned above.